neil gaiman - john watkiss bryan talbot - mark buckingham

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VERTIGO

THE SANDMAN™

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SUGGESTED FOR MATURE READERS

♫

SO... WHERE ARE YOU FROM?

SEATTLE. YOU?

THE NECROPOLIS LITHARGE.

AH. RIGHT. WHERE'S THAT?

IN THE SHADOW OF THE QUINSY MOUNTAINS.

SPARTAN QUALITY GOALSKINS

AH.

A DARK THUNDERSTORM AROSE SUDDENLY, AND THE BROUGHAM IN WHICH MY COMPANIONS AND I WERE TRAVELLING WAS WASHED INTO A RIVER.

I CRASHED A CAR INTO A TREE.

THIS IS A PRETTY *FUSTY* DIVE, EH? YOU EVER BEEN HERE BEFORE?

UH-UH. I WAS JUST *LUCKY* TO FIND THIS PLACE.

SO WERE WE.

AH WELL. BACK TO THE TALES.

IT'S LIKE WHEN I WAS A LITTLE KID AT SUMMER CAMP, SITTING AROUND A FIRE, TELLING STORIES.

WE HAVE TO KILL TIME *SOMEHOW*, UNTIL THE STORMS ARE OVER.

GENTLEME

WHAT THE HELL WAS *THAT*?

HEY, I'M BRANT TUCKER.

KLAPROTH.

IS THAT YOUR *FIRST* NAME, OR YOUR *LAST*?

JUST KLAPROTH.

...I SUPPOSE I *COULD* TELL THE NEXT STORY.

OF *COURSE* YOU COULD, CLURACAN.

BUT YOU MUST UNDERSTAND, I HAVE *NO* FACILITY FOR FICTION.

OF COURSE YOU DON'T.

AND IF I *DO* PERFORCE NARRATE A MINOR INCIDENT FROM MY LIFE, THEN I AM AFRAID IT WILL BE *VERY* DRY AND DULL...

I LACK THE ABILITY TO EMBELLISH. THUS YOU WOULD PERFORCE NEEDS CONTENT ALL YOURSELVES, ONE AND ALL, WITH A RATHER *SPARSE* AND *UNINTERESTING* NARRATIVE.

OH, *ALL* RIGHT CLURACAN. LOOK, IF YOU DON'T *WANT* TO, I'M SURE WE CAN FIND *SOMEONE ELSE* TO TELL THE NEXT TALE...

AS I WAS SAYING, *ALTHOUGH* MY TALE IS A DRY AND UNEXCITING ONE, CHIEFLY DEALING WITH LOCAL POLITICS AND CITY HISTORY, I AM *SURE* THAT IT WILL ASSIST IN PASSING A *FEW* IDLE MOMENTS, UNTIL THIS STORM SUBSIDES AND WE CAN GO ON OUR VARIOUS WAYS.

DOES EVERYONE HAVE A *DRINK*? GOOD.

SO... LET MY AUDITORS FEEL THEMSELVES TRANSPORTED FAR, FAR FROM HERE TO LANDS *FAR* DISTANT...

...TO THE CITY *AURELIAN*.

"THE CITY OF AURELIA IS STILL TO BE CONSIDERED ONE OF THE GREATEST CITIES OF THE PLAINS.

TWELVE HUNDRED YEARS AGO IT HAD REAL INFLUENCE AND CLASS. I RECALL IT THEN AS A PLACE OF PALACES AND SPREADING TREES, OF GRAND HOUSES AND WHITE TEMPLES, AND, DEMONSTRATING THE CITY BELONGED AS MUCH TO THE DEAD AS TO THE LIVING, MAGNIFICENT TOMBS.

IT WAS A PLACE OF WIDE STREETS AND GLORIOUS FOUNTAINS, WHICH COOLED THE CITY IN THE HOT SUMMER MONTHS; OF WIDE GREEN PARKS AND SOLEMNLY PAINTED MARBLE STATUES.

AURELIA WAS DOMINATED BY THE TOMB OF CARYS CARNIFEX, THE EIGHTH TEMPORAL EMPEROR OF THE PLAINS: A GARGANTUAN STRUCTURE, BUILT ON A HILL OVERLOOKING THE CITY, WHICH HIS SUCCESSORS HAD ANNEXED AND BUILT ON TO, AND WHICH HAD, THROUGH A PROCESS OF GRADUAL EVOLUTION, BECOME THE HOUSE OF THE RULER, AND OF THE REIGNING DYNASTY.

THAT WAS, AS I SAY, SOME TIME AGO.

IT WAS MUCH MORE RECENTLY THAT I WAS SUMMONED TO THE HOUSE OF OUR LADY...

CLURACAN. I HAVE A *TASK* FOR YOU.

I HEAR AND OBEY, MAJESTY.

OF COURSE YOU DO, CLURACAN.

TELL ME: WHEN WERE YOU LAST IN AURELIA OF THE PLAINS?

IT'S BEEN A LITTLE WHILE. TWELVE, THIRTEEN HUNDRED YEARS, PERHAPS.

I'M AFRAID I HAD TO *LEAVE* A TRIFLE *HURRIEDLY*...

I SEEM TO RECALL SOMETHING OF THE MATTER. SOMETIMES I *WISH* THAT MY AMBASSADOR WAS NOT QUITE SO...LET ME SEE. *FECKLESS?*

YOU REIGN OVER A FECKLESS DOMINION, MY LADY.

INDEED I DO. WELL, YOU ARE THE BEST I HAVE, CLURACAN, AND TO SAY THAT IS TO SAY LITTLE INDEED.

MM. THEY WILL HAVE FORGOTTEN YOUR LITTLE PECCADILLOES BY NOW. THEY ARE A *MORTAL* FOLK, AFTER ALL.

THE LORDS CARNAL OF AURELIA HAVE REQUESTED THAT WE SEND AN ENVOY TO A SUMMIT THAT THE FOLK OF THE PLAINS ARE HOLDING. I AM SENDING YOU.

MY INTERESTS IN THIS MATTER ARE *SMALL*, BUT *DEFINITE*.

AN ALLIANCE OF THE FOLK OF THE CITIES OF THE PLAINS WOULD *NOT* BE A GOOD THING FOR FAERIE.

I WOULD LIKE TO SEE ANY SUCH ALLIANCE PREVENTED FROM COMING ABOUT.

AH. I SEE.

GOOD.

WHEN WOULD YOU NEED ME TO LEAVE, MY LADY?

FORTHWITH.

BUT...

YES?

YOU SEE, YOUR MAJESTY, I HAD RATHER BEEN PROMISING MY *SISTER* THAT I WOULD PAY HER A VISIT.

YOUR SISTER?

NUALA.

NUALA. OF COURSE. INDEED. WELL, SHE WILL JUST HAVE TO *WAIT*. I NEED YOU IN AURELIA NOW.

WHATEVER YOU SAY, LADY.

HOW LARGE A RETINUE SHOULD I TAKE WITH ME?

NO RETINUE. YOU WORK BEST ALONE, CLURACAN.

...AS YOU WILL, MAJESTY.

IRON NAILS!

AH WELL. IT WAS ALREADY A FEW YEARS SINCE I HAD PROMISED NUALA I WOULD RETURN AND VISIT HER. AYE, WE ARE INDEED A FECKLESS FOLK.

WHEN I RETURNED TO MY OWN HOUSE, TO PACK, I FOUND THREE SCROLLS WAITING FOR ME.

THE FIRST PROCLAIMED ME TO BE THE REPRESENTATIVE OF QUEEN MAB OF FAERIE. SHE HAD PLACED A SMALL GLAMOUR ON THE SCROLL, SUCH THAT IT COULD NOT BE TAKEN FROM ME.

THE SECOND WAS A MAP OF THE PLAINS, WITH PORTALS TO FAERIE AND THE FAR REALMS MARKED.

THE THIRD SCROLL WAS A LENGTHY ESSAY ON THE CURRENT POLITICAL, RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE CITY OF AURELIA, AND OF THE OTHER DOZEN CITIES OF THE PLAINS.

I RESOLVED TO READ IT WHEN I HAD THE TIME...

THEN I RAISED A MOUNT AND RODE OUT OF FAERIE.

EVEN RIDING HARD, WITH AS FEW CHANGES OF REALM AS POSSIBLE ON THE WAY IT WAS STILL A LONG RIDE.

I RODE THROUGH THE FENS THAT BORDER FAERIE TO DUSKWARD. THE SCREAMS OF THE WATTER-WOMEN ROSE AROUND ME, AND THE DEAD HANDS SLITHERED THROUGH THE BRACKISH OOZE, GRASPING AND WAVING.

FROM THE FEN-PORTAL TO THE MOUNTAIN-PORTAL, THROUGH SCATHACH, AND OUT TO THE PLAINS, A LITTLE TO THE WEST OF THE CITY AURELIAN.

THERE WERE NO GUARDS ON THE CITY GATE, AND I RODE IN, UNCHALLENGED, BETWEEN A PARTY OF SPICE MERCHANTS AND A COUPLE OF PRIESTS ON MUD-BESPATTERED AND MALODOROUS DONKEYS.

AURELIA OF THE PLAINS WAS, ALAS, NO LONGER AS I REMEMBERED IT.

THE ROADS WERE THICK WITH FILTH; HERE AND THERE A HOUSE HAD COLLAPSED INTO THE STREET, UNREPAIRED AND UNREMOVED.

EVENTUALLY, I FOUND MY WAY BLOCKED BY A FALLEN BUILDING.

YOU ARE ON YOUR WAY TO THE PALACE OF THE PSYCHOPOMP? YOU ARE THE *ENVOY, CLURACAN?*

YES.

I THOUGHT AS MUCH. I AM BROTHER CABRIOLET. PLEASE, FOLLOW ME.

HE LED ME THROUGH THE BACK WAYS OF THE CITY, EVER UPWARD, TOWARD THE BUILDING THAT HAD ONCE BEEN THE TOMB OF CARYS CARNIFEX.

THE CITY WAS A MAZE; THE STREETPLAN I RECALLED NO LONGER APPLIED.

THERE USED TO BE AN *AMPHITHEATER* HERE, DID THERE NOT?

NOT IN *MY* TIME.

MY LORD. I *WAS* SUPPOSED TO *MEET* YOU AT THE CITY GATE. IT WOULD BE A *KINDNESS*, WERE YOU TO ALLOW HIS GRACE TO BELIEVE THAT THIS HAD OCCURRED.

WELL, I *CERTAINLY* WOULDN'T WANT TO GET YOU INTO TROUBLE.

I *WOULD* BE IN YOUR DEBT.

AND, AFTER A TIME, WE REACHED THE PALACE OF THE LORDS CARNAL.

MY LORD CLURACAN. WE *RATHER* EXPECTED YOU TO HAVE A RETINUE. NONE OF THE OTHER AMBASSADORS ARRIVED ALONE.

AH. WELL, I LIKE TO BE OUT OF THE CROWD.

THE PSYCHOPOMP WILL BE GIVING *AUDIENCE* AT THIS TIME. THROUGH HERE.

SIR--I HAVE BEEN *WAITING* WITH MY PETITION FOR MANY *MONTHS*, NOW...

SIR--A *SMALL* INDULGENCE IS ALL I REQUIRE, THAT MY DAUGHTER MAY REMARRY, IF YOU COULD GIVE THIS *GOLD* TO HIS GRACE...

SIR--I SEEK SIMPLY TO DONATE THESE HOLY *BONES* TO THE PSYCHOPOMP, IN EXCHANGE FOR A BENEFICE IN...

YOUR GRACE, THE FOLK OF THE PLAINS ARE A *POOR* FOLK. THEY WILL NOT STAND FOR ANOTHER TAX.

FIRST, IT'S *NOT* ANOTHER TAX. IT'S THEIR TICKET TO A PAIN-FREE AFTERLIFE.

AND *SECOND*, THEY WILL STAND FOR WHAT*EVER* I *TELL* THEM.

AM I *NOT* THEIR SPIRITUAL LEADER? AM I NOT *ALSO* THEIR TEMPORAL LORD?

YOU ARE THE TEMPORAL LORD SOLELY OF AURELIA: ONE CITY ONLY.

TRUE. BUT I AM PSYCHOPOMP OF ALL THE PLAINS. AND THEY WILL DO AS *I* SEE FIT.

MY LORD, CAN I MAKE AN INTRODUCTION? THIS IS SIR CLURACAN, QUEEN MAB'S ENVOY.

AH.

AND I HAVE THE HONOR, SIR CLURACAN, OF PRESENTING TO YOU, INNOCENT XI, PSYCHOPOMP OF THE UNIVERSAL AURELIAN CHURCH, WHO IS ALSO IN HIS PERSON CARYS XXXV, LORD CARNIFEX OF THE CITY OF AURELIA.

CHARMED, YOUR GRACE.

YOU *EATEN* ANYTHING YET, FAIRY?

NO, YOUR GRACE.

HAVE A *CHICKEN* LEG. YOU WILL BE AT THE COUNCIL TOMORROW?

CERTAINLY.

SEE THAT HE IS QUARTERED, AND FED. AND ASSIGNED A GUARD.

AS YOU SAY, YOUR GRACE.

HOY! CLURACAN. YOU WANT A *GIRL* SENT TO YOUR ROOM?

A *BOY*, THEN?

NO, YOUR GRACE.

NO THANK YOU, YOUR GRACE.

SUIT YOURSELF.

THIS WILL BE YOUR ROOM.

THERE WILL BE A GUARD ON THE DOOR AT ALL TIMES, FOR YOUR PROTECTION, AND SHOULD YOU NEED ANYTHING.

OH GOOD. *THAT'S* A RELIEF. WOULDN'T WANT ANYTHING HAPPENING TO ME, EH?

IS THERE ANYTHING ACTUALLY TO *PROTECT* ME FROM?

IT CAN BE DANGEROUS TO WALK THE CORRIDORS UNESCORTED. THE GUARDS MIGHT MISTAKE YOU FOR AN INTRUDER, AND *SPIT* YOU BEFORE THEY REALIZED OTHERWISE.

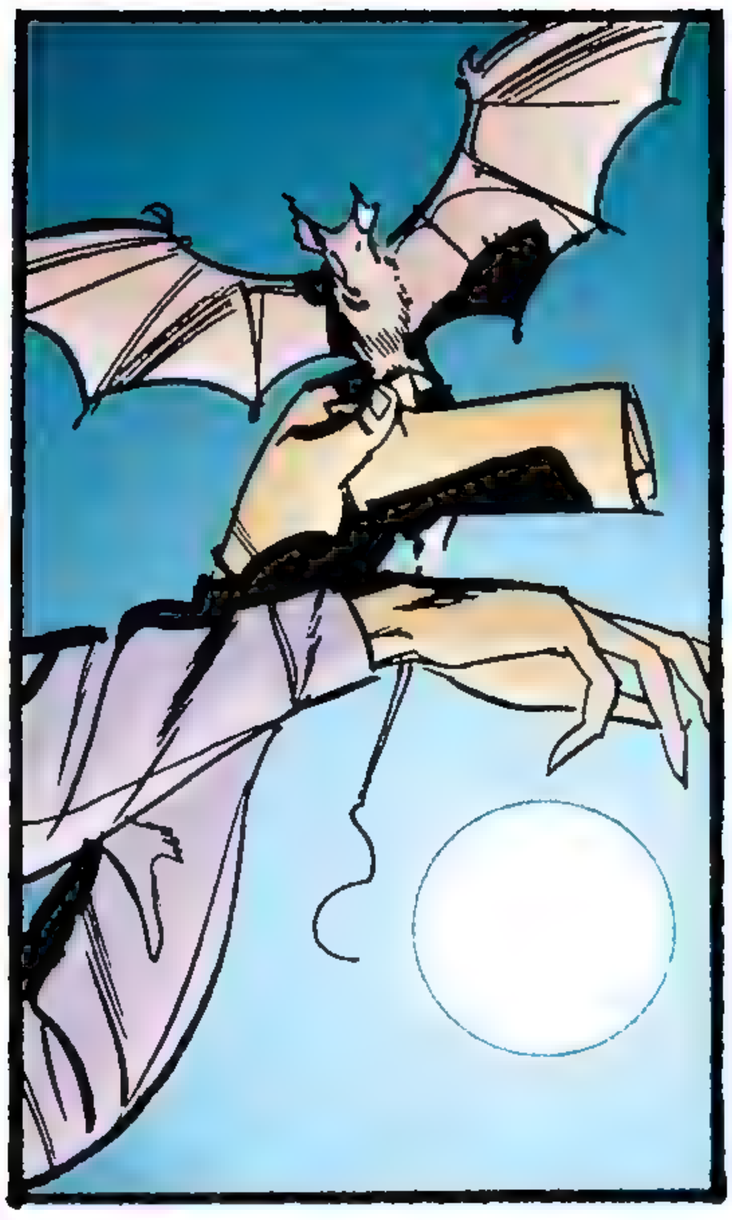
OF COURSE.

SLEEP WELL, SIR CLURACAN.

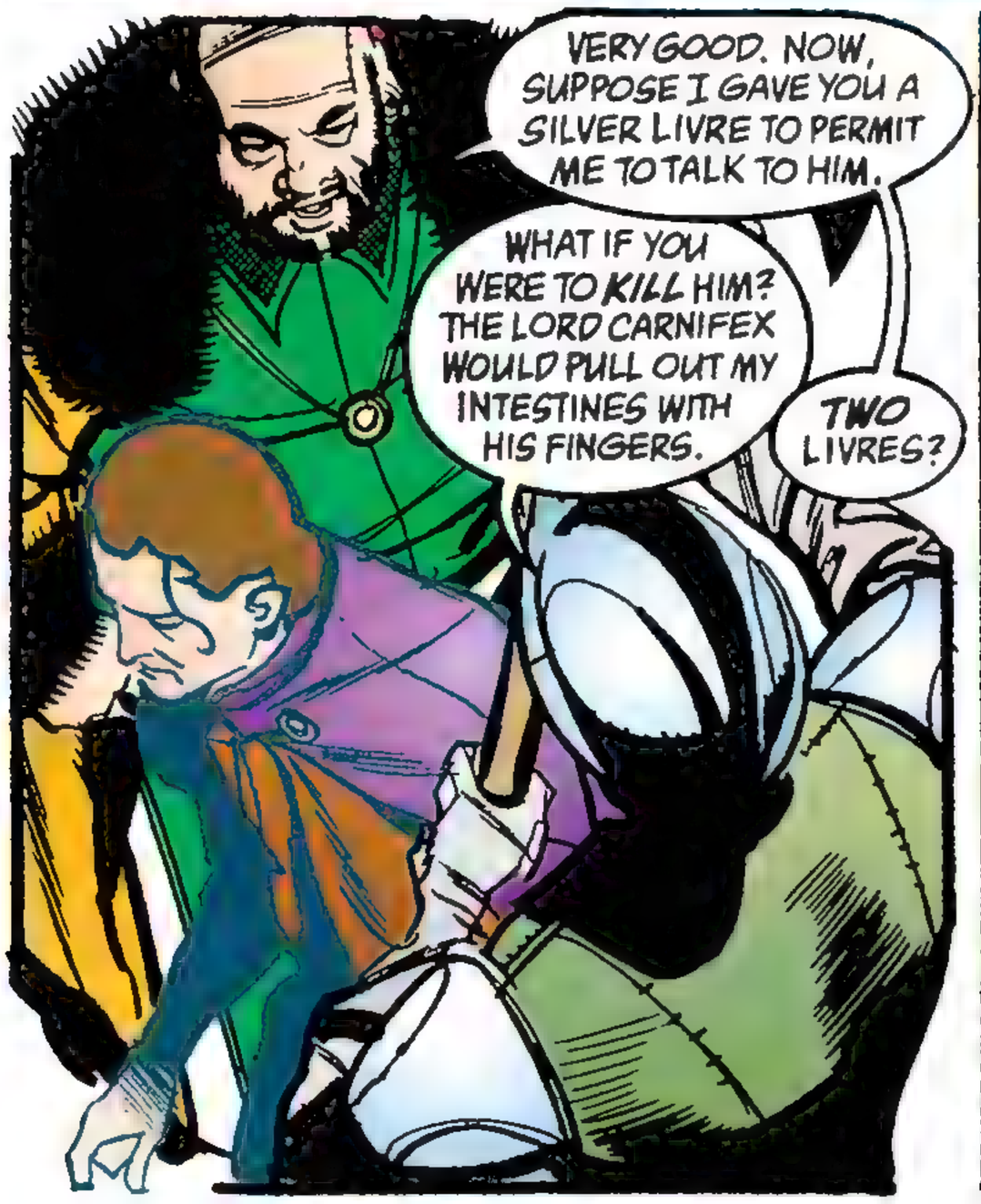
A preliminary report from Cluracan of faerie to his queen: Lady, I have arrived here safely. Yours obediently, Cluracan

P.S.: Did you know that the new Psychopomp of the plains is also the physical ruler of Aurelia?

♪♫♪



I HAVE NO ORDERS TO PERMIT VISITORS.
WELL, IS THE FAIRY IN THERE?
OF COURSE HE'S IN THERE. I'VE BEEN HERE ALL NIGHT.


VERY GOOD. NOW, SUPPOSE I GAVE YOU A SILVER LIVRE TO PERMIT ME TO TALK TO HIM.
WHAT IF YOU WERE TO KILL HIM? THE LORD CARNIFEX WOULD PULL OUT MY INTESTINES WITH HIS FINGERS.
TWO LIVRES?

I HEARD VOICES. GOOD GRACIOUS. IT'S YOU. I WAS WONDERING WHERE YOU'D GOT TO.
WELL, COME INSIDE.
AND A GOOD EVENING TO YOU, YOUR GUARDSHIP.

AND WHO WOULD YOU BE, THEN, WITH YOUR SILVER LIVRES AND YOUR BIG FUR COAT?

I AM OTHO, OF THE PLAINS. YOU'VE MET MY NEPHEW MAIRON THEN?

MAIRON?

PSYCHOPOMP INNOCENT XI. OR CARNIFEX CARYS XXXV. DEPENDS ON WHETHER HE'S HOLDING THE KEYS TO THE AFTER-LIFE, AND HAS THE POWER TO ESCORT YOU TO HEAVEN OR HELL; OR WHETHER HE HAS POWER OF LIFE AND DEATH OVER ALL THE FLESHLY BODIES IN AURELIA.

AH.

ALSO MY NEPHEW MAIRON. MY LATE SISTER'S SON.

I THOUGHT THAT THE CARNIFEX AND THE PSYCHOPOMP USED TO BE TWO VERY DIFFERENT PEOPLE.

THEY *USED* TO BE. THAT WAS BEFORE THE *TREATY*.

TREATY?

THE LAST PSYCHOPOMP'S TREATY WITH THE LAST CARNIFEX, OVER THE RIGHT OF SUCCES-SION.

AFTER MAIRON WAS CHOSEN BY THE SPIRITUAL ELECTORS TO BE PSYCHOPOMP, HE PRODUCED THIS TREATY, STATING THAT IF THE CARNIFEX HAD NO HEIRS, THEN THE REIGNING PSYCHOPOMP WAS ALSO TO RULE THE CITY CARNAL.

IT WAS SEALED WITH THE SEALS OF HIS PREDECESSOR; IT COULD NOT HAVE BEEN A FORGERY.

AND SEEING THAT THE CARNIFEX'S ONLY MALE HEIR HAD JUST BEEN KILLED IN A STREET BRAWL...WELL, *WHO* WAS GOING TO *PROTEST*?

"AND NOW MAIRON'S MADE IT TO THE TOP *TWICE*. HE WANTS *MORE*.

"HE'S THE SPIRITUAL LEADER OF THE ENTIRE PLAINS. HE'S ALSO THE CARNIFEX OF AURELIA.

"AND IF HE CAN UNITE THE CITIES OF THE PLAINS, THEN HE *WOULD* HAVE *COMPLETE* POWER."

AND WHERE DO *YOU* STAND ON THIS?

I WOULD LIKE A PSYCHOPOMP WHO BELIEVES IN THE HOLY TWINS. I WOULD LIKE A CARNIFEX WHO HAS THE BEST INTERESTS OF AURELIA AT HEART.

I WOULD LIKE WHAT IS *BEST* FOR THE FOLK OF THE PLAINS.

AH WELL, *ENOUGH* OF THIS IDLE CHIT-CHAT. I MERELY WANTED TO WELCOME A VISITOR TO THE CITY OF AURELIA.

GOODNIGHT.

WE OF FAERIE ARE OF THE WILD MAGIC.

WE ARE NOT CREATURES OF SPELLS AND GRIMOIRES. WE *ARE* SPELLS, AND WE ARE WRITTEN OF IN GRIMOIRES.

THERE ARE THE GLAMOURS, THAT WE ALL CONTROL, TO SOME DEGREE OR ANOTHER: WE CAN STAND IN A CROWD AND NEVER BE NOTICED; WE CAN MAKE YOU LOVE US TILL YOUR HEART GIVES OUT. ALL THE MIRROR GAMES WE PLAY...

THE FAIR FOLK ARE CREATURES OF GLAMOUR, AFTER ALL.

THERE ARE DARKER CURRENTS THAT RUN BENEATH THE SURFACE, LIKE THE WILD WIND STORMING ACROSS THE HEATHLAND OR THE FLASH OF LIGHTNING ON A CLEAR SUMMER'S NIGHT, AND THESE ARE NOT PREDICTABLE THINGS.

FOR EXAMPLE: SOMETIMES WE WILL SAY TRUE THINGS. AND THESE THINGS WE SAY ARE NEITHER GLAMOUR NOR MAGIC, NEITHER PREDICTION NOR CURSE: BUT SOMETIMES WHAT WE SAY IS TRUE.

AND EVEN IF YOU'RE A TREMENDOUS LIAR, LIKE MYSELF, WELL, IT'S EVEN TRUE FOR ME.

I MENTION THIS TO GIVE A CERTAIN CONTEXT TO WHAT HAPPENED AT THE COUNCIL MEETING, THE NEXT MORNING.

I WAS IN A POOR SEAT, LISTENING LESS THAN INTENTLY TO THE VARIOUS FACTIONS, EMISSARIES, LORDS AND PRIESTS, AS THEY DISCUSSED THE FUTURE OF THE CITIES OF THE PLAINS.

AND I FELT IT WELLING INSIDE ME, LIKE A SNEEZE, OR AN ORGASM, DETERMINED TO COME OUT, WILL-I OR NEVER-SO.

AS I RECALL, THE CARNIFEX OF ONE OF THE MORE DISTANT PLAINS CITIES--I FORGET PRECISELY WHICH-- WAS ADMITTING THAT, IN PRINCIPLE, HE SAW NOTHING WRONG WITH AN ALLIANCE OF THE CITIES, WHEN I FOUND MYSELF GETTING TO MY FEET.

OH NO. NOT AGAIN.

LOOK! IT'S THE FAIRY.

SIT DOWN, FAIRY. IT'S NOT YOUR TURN TO SPEAK YET.

Both Psychopomp and Carnifex, you've gained great heights through death and lies: But now the dead begin to rise, and debts forgotten time collects.

The dogs will chew your carcass yet; amidst your bones the rats will romp, and even history shall forget you, Carnifex and Psychopomp.

THERE WAS A MOMENT OF SILENCE, THEN, IN THE GREAT HALL. YOU COULD HAVE HEARD A SILVER PIN DROP TO THE MARBLE FLOOR. AND I THOUGHT TO MYSELF, OH SHIT.

BRING HIM HERE.

I DON'T LIKE YOU, FAIRY.

I DON'T LIKE THE IDEA OF HAVING TO EXPLAIN TO THE NEXT AMBASSADOR YOUR QUEEN SENDS US THAT I WAS FORCED TO EXECUTE HER LAST ONE.

BUT HER REALM'S A LONG WAY AWAY.

AND I'VE A HUNDRED PEOPLE HERE WILL TESTIFY TO YOUR SACRILEGIOUS INSULTS. WHAT'S SHE GOING TO DO, THEN, EH?

BRING YOU BACK TO LIFE?

YOU KNOW, OVER A THOUSAND YEARS AGO ONE OF YOUR KIND CAUSED A GREAT DEAL OF TROUBLE IN THIS CITY.

WE TRIED TO LOCK HIM UP AND HE WALKED OUT OF THE CELL LIKE IT WASN'T EVEN THERE.

SO WE LEARNED A FEW THINGS, JUST IN CASE THERE WAS A NEXT TIME.

COLD IRON. THAT'S WHAT YOU PEOPLE DON'T LIKE, ISN'T IT?

TAKE HIM AWAY.

I WANT COLD IRON MANACLES ON HIS HANDS AND FEET: COLD IRON BARS AROUND HIS CELL.

I DON'T *KNOW* WHAT THOSE *THREATS* WERE ABOUT, FAIRY, BUT WHEN ALL THIS IS OVER I'LL *POP* OUT YOUR EYEBALLS WITH MY THUMBS AND PISS IN THE *SOCKETS*. THIS I SWEAR.

THEY WEREN'T THREATS, MAIRON. THAT WAS A FORE-TELLING. THIS *I* SWEAR...

:PTUI!:

KCHUNG KCHUNG

THERE WE ARE.

YOU KNOW THAT STUFF HIS HOLINESS WAS SAYING, ABOUT HOW HE'D POP OUT YOUR EYEBALLS AND PISS IN THE HOLES?

I REMEMBER.

HE *WILL*, YOU KNOW. I'VE SEEN HIM DO IT TO PEOPLE.

THANKS.

NUALA? HOW DID *YOU* GET HERE? THE DOOR IS CLOSED WITH COLD IRON.

I DON'T UNDERSTAND...

CLURACAN? MY BROTHER? I WAS SO HOPING YOU WOULD COME TO ME. IT'S BEEN SO *LONELY* HERE. I HAVE SO MANY THINGS TO TELL YOU...

BUT. I *DIDN'T* COME TO SEE YOU. *YOU* CAME TO SEE *ME*. YOU'RE IN THE DREAMING, MY BROTHER.

CLURACAN? ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?

NO. NO, I'M NOT.

I THINK I'VE RATHER MESSED EVERYTHING UP.

CLURACAN? ARE YOU IN *TROUBLE* AGAIN?

THAT IS INDEED ONE WAY OF PUTTING IT.

BAD TROUBLE?

I'M AFRAID SO.

OH *DEAR*. ISN'T THERE SOMETHING I CAN DO?

CAN YOU BREAK BONDS OF COLD IRON? OR OPEN COLD IRON DOORS?

DON'T YOU WORRY YOUR HEART ABOUT ME, SISTER. I'LL BE *FINE* ON MYOWN. I ALWAYS *AM*. EVERYTHING WILL WORK OUT FOR THE BEST. JUST DON'T *WORRY*.

NOBODY'S FINE ON THEIR OWN, CLURACAN. PEOPLE NEED PEOPLE.

I'LL GET HELP.

NO...

NO...

A STUPID DREAM...

OAK AND ASH AND THORN, I THOUGHT, BUT THE QUEEN WOULD BE ANGRY WHEN SHE HEARD I WAS DEAD. AND *I* CAN'T SAY I WAS THRILLED ABOUT IT, EITHER.

A good day to you, Cluracan of Faerie.

Your sister, Nuala, has spent some time imploring me to come to your assistance.

I have, albeit reluctantly, agreed so to do.

RELUCTANTLY, LORD SHAPER? I WOULD HATE TO PUT YOU OUT IN ANY WAY.

Cluracan, it is one to me whether you live or die. It is not one to your sister, and she serves me well and faithfully.

I would not see her needlessly distressed.

BUT YOU DO DO NOT CARE THAT I MIGHT BE NEEDLESSLY DISTRESSED? OR THAT MY QUEEN MIGHT BE INCONVENIENCED?

Titania has other ambassadors. And what happens to you is of little consequence to me.

Well? Shall I free you?

IF YOU PLEASE, LORD SHAPER.

Very well.

I... I AM GRATEFUL.

As you should be. Do you wish to leave this plane, at this time?

WOULD THAT I COULD. BUT MY QUEEN WOULD NOT TAKE MY RETURN KINDLY, MY TASK STILL UNDONE.

MY LORD SHAPER, THE CELL DOOR IS ALSO OF COLD IRON.

I have done as your sister asked. I will take my leave of you, Cluracan. Have you a message for her?

TELL HER THAT I WILL VISIT HER YET, IN YOUR CASTLE.

AND, UH... TELL HER THAT CLURACAN OWES HER HIS LIFE; AND IF WE OF THE FAIR FOLK HAD SOULS, HE WOULD OWE HER THAT, TOO.

I will tell her. Your sister... She has a good heart, Cluracan.

Fare well.

HE LEFT ME, THEN. AND I FOUND MYSELF ALONE IN THE PALACE OF THE UNIVERSAL AURELIAN CHURCH, THAT HAD ONCE BEEN THE TOMB OF CARYS CARNIFEX.

NOW THE HOME OF NEPHEW MAIRON, WHO UNITED WITHIN HIMSELF THE ROLES OF SPIRITUAL LEADER AND TEMPORAL LORD, IN DEFIANCE OF CERTAIN LAWS. NEPHEW MAIRON, WHO SEEMED TO BE COMING CLOSE TO UNITING THE CITIES OF THE PLAINS.

WELL, I HAD BEEN INSTRUCTED TO PREVENT SUCH AN ALLIANCE FROM COMING ABOUT.

I RESOLVED TO DO IT AS BEST I COULD. WITH ALL THE RESOURCES AND CRAFT AND GLAMOUR I POSSESSED. NOT TO MENTION A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF MALICE.

THUS IT WAS THAT, BEFORE THE SUN SET, AN ELDERLY PRIEST-- PERHAPS A LITTLE THE WORSE FOR DRINK-- WAS HEARD TO SWEAR BLIND THAT HE HAD SEEN THE PSYCHOPOMP SODOMIZING A VIRGIN CHILD IN FRONT OF A STATUE OF THE HOLY TWINS.

ALSO THAT THE PSYCHOPOMP HAD CLAIMED THAT ADMINISTERING THE BLESSED SACRAMENT MEANT AS LITTLE TO HIM AS WIPING HIS ANUS, AND INDEED HAD PERFORMED BOTH ACTIONS AT THE SAME TIME.

SHORTLY AFTER THAT A YOUNG NOBLE--AGAIN, IN HIS CUPS-- BRAGGED PERHAPS TOO LOUDLY TO AN ASSEMBLAGE OF WHORES OF THE CITY, THAT HE WAS HIRED BY THE PSYCHOPOMP TO MURDER THE CARNIFEX'S HEIR IN A STAGED STREET-BRAWL.

A FOREIGN SOLDIER CONFIDED IN AN INNKEEPER THAT THE CARNIFEX WAS ENTERING INTO AN AGREEMENT WITH THE FOLK OF THE PLAINS TO SELL THE FREE CITIZENS OF AURELIA INTO SLAVERY, TO COVER THE DEBTS OF THE CHURCH TREASURY.

THE INNKEEPER TOOK NO TIME IN REPEATING THESE TIDINGS TO HIS CUSTOMERS.

AND, MOST DAMNING OF ALL, A MAN WHOM HIS OWN MOTHER WOULD HAVE SWORN TO BE THE ARCHVICAR OF WESTERN AURELIA WENT DOWN ON HIS KNEES IN A PUBLIC STREET AND CONFESSED, LOUDLY, IN THE NAME OF THE TWINS, THAT THE TREATY PROCLAIMING CARNIFEX AND PSYCHOPOMP ONE AND THE SAME WAS A CRASS FORGERY.

IT'S AMAZING HOW MUCH ONE CAN ACCOMPLISH IN AN EVENING, IF ONE IS WILLING TO EXPEND A LITTLE EFFORT, AND TO WALK BRISKLY.

WHAT'S HAPPENING? IN THE NAME OF ALL THAT'S HOLY, TELL ME WHAT IS HAPPENING!

AH...YOUR GRACE: IT WOULD APPEAR THAT THE CITY IS IN REVOLT.

I KNOW THAT, CABRIOLET. I'M NOT STUPID. BUT WHY? HOW?

THEY SAY THAT YOUR PREDECESSOR, CARYS XXXIV, APPEARED TO THE MULTITUDES AND ANNOUNCED THAT YOU HAD HIM POISONED--

AND THAT THE TREATY WAS A FORGERY, AND THAT--

LIES!

ENOUGH!

WELL, THIS CITADEL HAS WITHSTOOD WORSE, OVER THE CENTURIES.

WHERE ARE THE PALACE GUARD?

YOUR GRACE, THE PALACE GUARD HAVE BEEN SENT FOR. BUT...THERE, UH, APPEARS TO BE...

OHH... WHY NOW, WHEN THE PALACE IS FILLED WITH AMBASSADORS AND ENVOYS? THEY'LL THINK I'VE LOST CONTROL.

I AM STILL IN CONTROL. DAMN IT! I AM!

OF COURSE YOU ARE, YOUR GRACE.

I... I'LL... DAMN THEIR EYES TO ALL THE HELLS...

VERY WELL. THIS FOOLISHNESS WILL BLOW OVER BY MORNING. IN THE MEANTIME WE WILL REMOVE OURSELVES TO A PLACE OF SAFETY.

DOWN HERE.

THIS IS NOW THE HOLY PALACE OF THE PSYCHOPOMP, BUT IT IS ALSO THE TOMB OF EVERY CARNIFEX SINCE THE FIRST CARYS, THE EIGHTH EMPEROR. EACH CARNIFEX HAS BEEN EMBALMED AND INTERRED, ENTHRONED AND CROWNED IN THIS PLACE.

AND ONLY I HAVE THE KEY.

THIS ROOM IS IMPREGNABLE. WE CAN WAIT OUT THE STORM IN HERE.

THERE WE GO. WE'LL BE SAFE THE NIGHT IN HERE.

RECOGNIZE *HIM*? MY PREDECESSOR AS CARNIFEX. UGLY OLD BUGGER, WASN'T HE?

YOU'RE LOOKING REMARKABLY WELL-PRESERVED, CARYS. YOU KNOW I DIDN'T POISON YOU, DON'T YOU? YOU KNOW IT'S ALL LIES.

WHY WOULD ANYONE POISON A MAN WITH A TERMINAL CANCER? WASTE OF GOOD POISON...

AREN'T YOU SCARED, YOUR GRACE?

SCARED? NOT LIKELY.

I KNOW THE FOLK OF AURELIA. A FOOLISH, CONFUSED RABBLE. THEY DON'T HAVE THE *WILL* TO REBEL. WHEN THE SUN RISES THEY WILL CREEP BACK TO THEIR HOMES AND HOVELS, ABASHED AND ASHAMED.

I WILL WAIT HERE WHILE THEY RIOT. AND THEN I WILL WALK THROUGH THE CITY, WITH THE PALACE GUARD BESIDE ME. AND, IN MY ROLE AS CARNIFEX OF AURELIA, I WILL PRONOUNCE SENTENCE OF DEATH ON EVERY TENTH MAN; WHILE AS THE CONDUCTOR OF THEIR SOULS, AS THE CHURCH'S LEADER, I WILL DAMN ALL THEIR SOULS TO ETERNAL COLD AND DARK...

AND I WILL FIND OUT WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS INSURRECTION. AND I WILL...

POP OUT THEIR EYEBALLS WITH YOUR THUMBS AND PISS INTO THE OPEN SOCKETS?

...YES.

YOUR GRACE, I KNOW WHO CAUSED THIS EVENING'S SHENANIGANS.

WHO? I WANT TO KNOW HIS NAME...

THE CLURACAN OF FAERIE.

ME.

DIDN'T ANYONE EVER TELL YOU IT'S BAD LUCK TO CROSS THE FAIR FOLK?

I SPOKE THE TRUTH TO YOU YESTER-MORN, NEPHEW MAIRON. YOUR TIME IS DONE.

WHY, YOU...

I'LL KILL YOU.

YOU HAVE BROUGHT SHAME ON THE CITY.

IS--IS THIS MORE OF YOUR TRICKERY, FAIRY?

UM. NO... NOT ONE OF MINE.

YOU KILLED MY SON, HOLLOW PRIEST. YOU STOLE MY THRONE.

KEEP AWAY FROM ME. KEEP AWAY...

NO!

"BUT NOW THE DEAD BEGIN TO RISE, AND DEBTS FORGOTTEN TIME COLLECTS."

WELL, WELL, WELL.

ON THE WAY DOWN THE STAIRS, I HAD A REALLY INVIGORATING SWORD-FIGHT WITH THE PALACE GUARD.

I MADE MY WAY TO THE STABLES, WHERE I HARNESSED UP MY MOUNT AND RODE OFF DOWN THE HILL, FAIRLY CONFIDENT THAT ANY POSSIBILITY OF AN ALLIANCE OF THE CITIES OF THE PLAIN WAS MORE OR LESS UTTERLY SCUPPERED.

AT THE BOTTOM OF THE HILL I OBSERVED NEPHEW MAIRON. THE DOGS OF THE TOWN HAD ALREADY GNAWED OFF MUCH OF HIS FACE, AND SOON THE RATS WOULD BE CLAMBERING THROUGH HIS RIB CAGE.

OF THE DEAD CARNIFEX THERE WAS NO SIGN.

AND I WAS ON MY WAY HOME WHEN THIS DAMNABLE STORM BLEW UP, AND THE WAY BETWEEN THE WORLDS BECAME IMPASSABLE.

SO I MADE MY WAY, HERE, TO THE WORLD'S END, TO WAIT IT OUT, AND TO GET MORE THAN A LITTLE DRUNK IN THE UNDERTIME.

AND *THAT* IS MY STORY.

WAS THAT THE *TRUTH*, CLURACAN?

ALL OF IT EXCEPT THE SWORD-FIGHT WITH THE PALACE GUARD, WHICH I THREW IN TO ADD VERISIMILITUDE, EXCITEMENT, AND LOCAL COLOR TO AN OTHERWISE BALD AND INSIPID NARRATIVE.

AND, OHH, I SUPPOSE THERE *MIGHT* HAVE BEEN A FEW OTHER DETAILS AND INCIDENTS I ADDED OR OMITTED, AS SEEMED NECESSARY TO ENSURE THE TALE FLOWED PROPERLY.

WELL, I DON'T BELIEVE A *WORD* OF IT.

HOW DID THE DEAD, WHAT WAS HE CALLED, THE CARNIFEX, COME BACK TO LIFE?

HOW SHOULD *I* KNOW? I *LIVED* IT, I DIDN'T MAKE IT UP.

AND THIS QUEEN OF YOURS, WAS SHE *HAPPY* WITH THE OUTCOME?

HER MOODS ARE NOT MINE TO KNOW, ALAS...

AND ARE YOU GOING TO SEE YOUR SISTER, NOW?

ENOUGH! I WILL NOT BE QUESTIONED FURTHER. I HAVE ENTERTAINED YOU; WHILED AWAY AN IDLE HOUR. IF MORE STORIES ARE TO BE TOLD THEN *OTHERS* WILL HAVE TO TELL THEM.

AND *I* AM PREPARED BOTH TO DRINK AND TO LISTEN.

SO.

WHOSE TALE IS NEXT?

Neil Gaiman, writer • John Watkiss, artist, pgs. 3-24 •
• Bryan Talbot, penciller, pgs. 1, 2, & 25 • Mark Buckingham, inker, pgs. 1, 2, & 25 •
• Danny Vozzo, colorist • Todd Klein, letterer • Karen Berger, editor • Shelly Roeberg, assistant editor •
Featuring characters created by Gaiman, Kieth and Dringenberg

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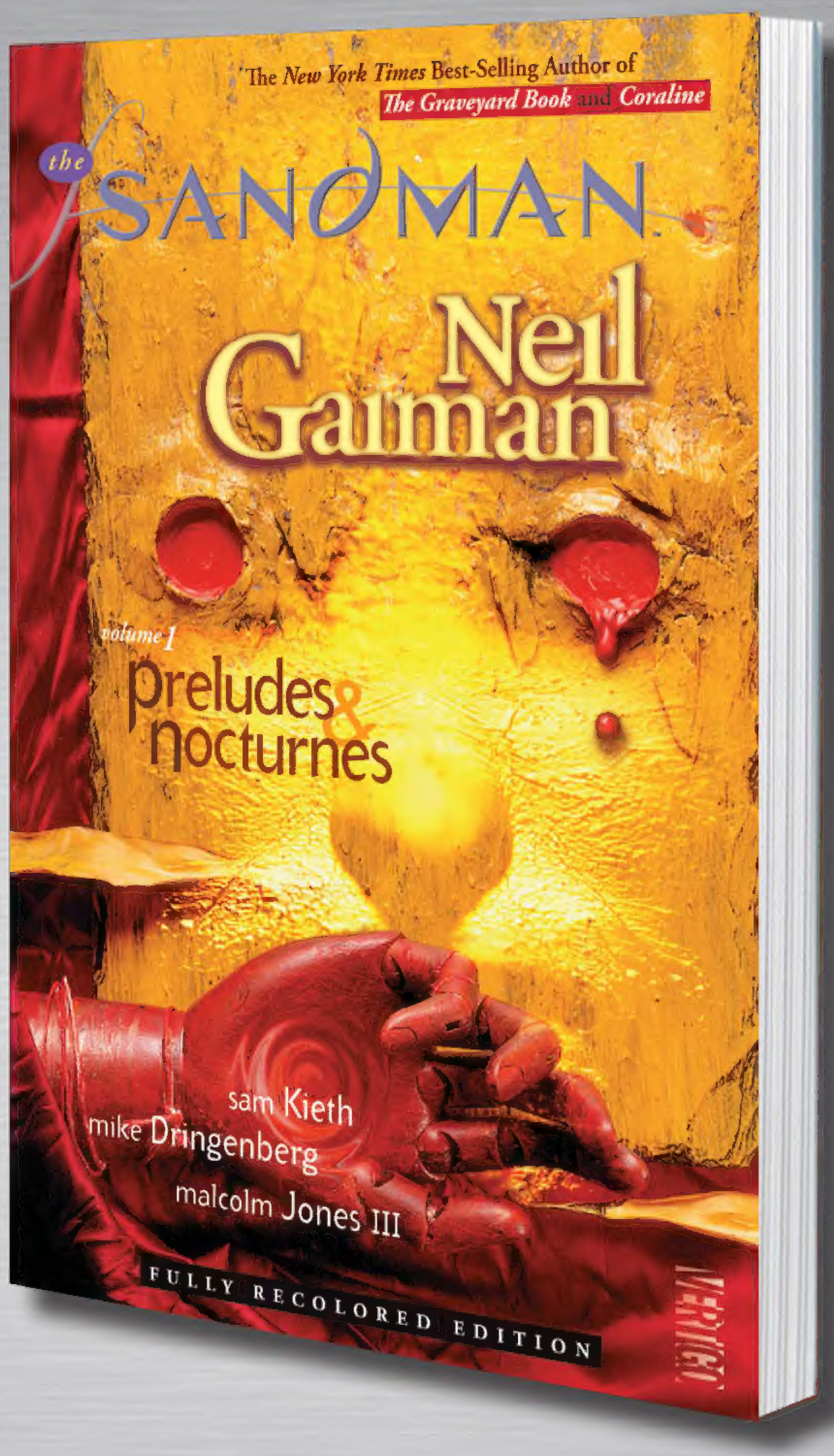
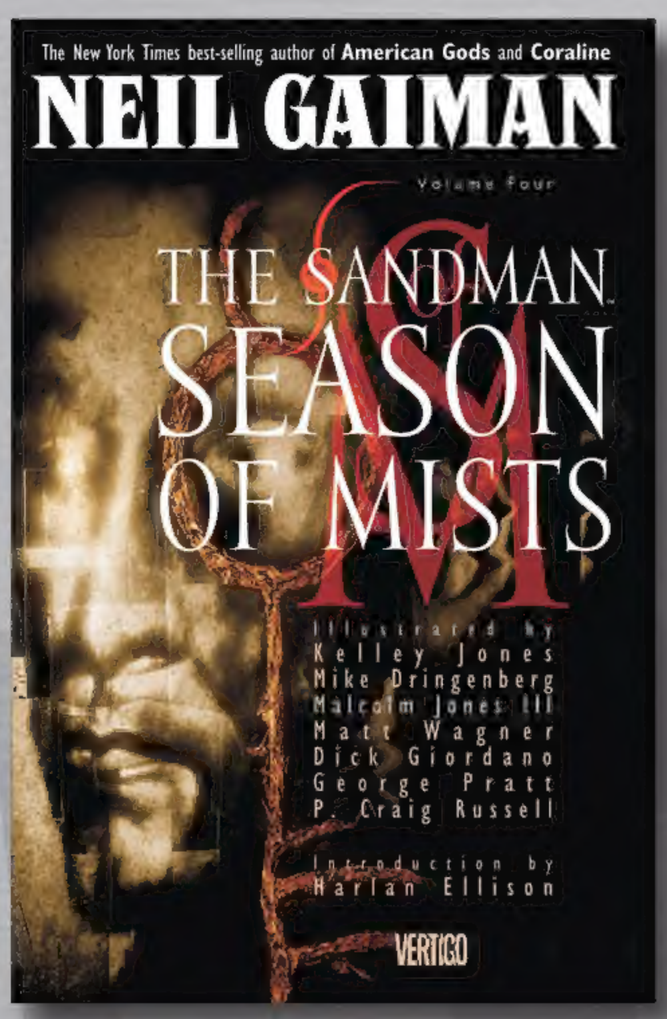
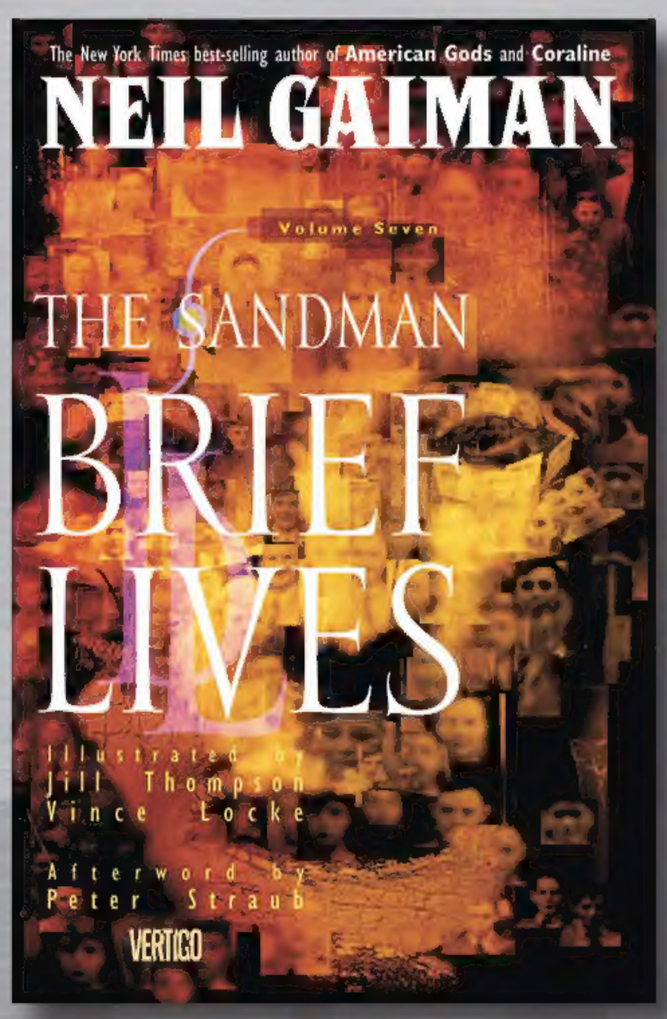


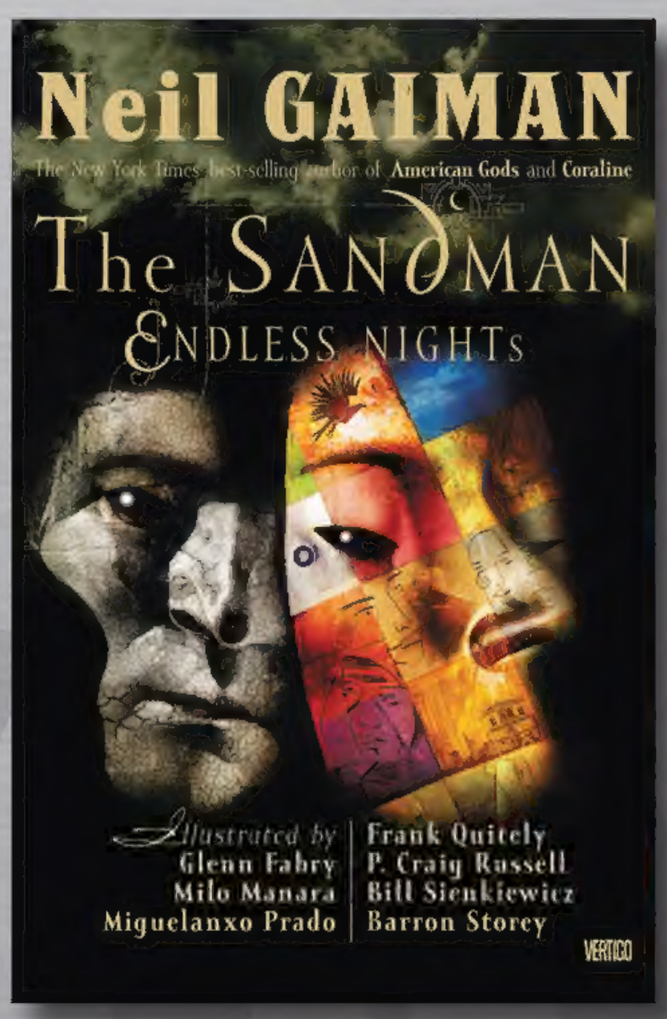
THE SANDMAN VOL. 4:
SEASON OF MISTS



THE SANDMAN VOL. 7:
BRIEF LIVES



THE SANDMAN:
ENDLESS NIGHTS



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